

Blackwork

Blackwork has been around for many centuries, but gained significant popularity during the reign of Henry VIII when he married Catherine of Aragon and she brought the popular technique from her native Spain to the English court. At the time it was known as "Spanishwork", but this term was dropped in favour of the term "Blackwork" when Henry VIII "divorced" his wife, and referring to anything as Spanish became politically unsafe in the Tudor courts ruled by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

In Tudor times and later, the blackwork embroidery was done almost always with black silk on white fabric and could be found on cuffs and collars of the garments of the wealthy and noble – the black thread made it easy to hide the dirt on the white garments. Other parts of the garments were also embroidered with blackwork, but this was for decoration and embellishment. Colours other than black were also used, but the availability was limited – red thread was sometimes used and this embroidery was known as Scarletwork.

As blackwork embroidery evolved, it began to incorporate a wider range of motifs and designs. Initially, the patterns were largely geometric and repetitive, reflecting the Moorish influences. However, as the art form matured, floral motifs, scrolling vines, and even figurative elements became prevalent.

Traditional blackwork embroidery utilizes a technique known as the "double running stitch" or "Holbein stitch," named after the renowned German painter Hans Holbein the Younger, who frequently depicted this style in his portraits. This stitch creates a reversible design, with the pattern appearing identical on both sides of the fabric.

The popularity of blackwork embroidery waned in the 17th century as new styles and techniques emerged. However, the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a revival of interest in historical needlework, leading to a resurgence of blackwork. Modern artists and embroiderers have embraced the technique, experimenting with contemporary designs and colours while staying true to its traditional roots.

Today, blackwork embroidery continues to inspire artists and crafters around the world. While traditional black and white remains popular, contemporary blackwork often incorporates coloured threads and modern materials. The technique has also been adapted to suit various styles, from minimalist and abstract designs to more intricate and ornate compositions.